A TIME TO WEEP AND A TIME TO LAUGH

April 19, 1987, 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:1-18

"Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?"
--John 20:15 (RSV)

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" the preacher of antiquity taught.

"...a time to be born and a time to die.
a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted...
a time to weep and a time to laugh."

It was a time to weep for the devastated followers of Jesus of Nazareth. For three years the dream had lived. For three years a small group of them had followed him, around Galilee mostly... They had watched and then helped as Jesus of Nazareth taught in synagogues and healed the sick.

As they watched and helped they had experienced a new reason for living: their own lives began to make more sense, they found that they were being healed and made whole as they participated in the new life lived by Jesus. At first, skeptical, they had come to believe that what he said was the truth, and tentatively at first, but then with growing conviction, they had experimented with it. They had actually tried to forgive one another. They had actually tried to serve one another. They had actually put into practice some of his more unlikely suggestions: for instance - "it's happier to give than to receive." And it had worked! It was true! They were becoming new people. The more they did it, the more natural it felt. It was almost as if their old personalities had died and that they had become new people.

They laughed a lot. They laughed in the way only those who are free from pretense, from self-consciousness and from fear, are able to laugh. They laughed at the funny things that happened, at amusing anecdotes he shared with them, and at the sheer, rich goodness of their experience. They laughed easily because out of their relationship with him they had come to understand that God - the mysterious, majestic, holy Lord whose name they did not even say out loud, had a human face, a face that looked like a parent, a face quite capable of smiling and laughing.

They were becoming new people. They liked what they were becoming. Some of them had changed gradually. Some of them argued with him everyday. "Turn the other cheek?... Blessed are the poor in spirit...?" You've got to be kidding. And some of them had come to him with no strength left to argue, with the life beaten out of them. Some had come to him out of need so utterly desperate that change was radical. Mary Magdalene was one of them. Tradition has tried on occasion to make her out to be a reformed prostitute. There is no evidence for that other than the fact that Magdala, her home, was a wide-open seaport which had a thriving prostitution business. What we do know about Mary is that she had changed radically. She was made well, healed from a condition her contemporaries knew as demon possession and which we might call psychosis, severe emotional disorder. People used to be afraid of her, stayed clear of her, never came near her, in fact. In the company of Jesus of Nazareth she had become whole. A miracle had happened. In the love and acceptance and strength of this man and the company of his friends, the old self had died and a new person had been born.

And so when he decided to go to Jerusalem for the Passover, and his friends began to object and seemed actually to drag their feet and fall behind on the way to the city, she stayed with him. And when the worst thing that could happen began to happen - as the authorities made their move and arranged for his arrest on trumped up charges including a night-time trial and a public humiliation, and as the others shrank back further from him, one by one, abandoning him to what appeared to be his fate - she stayed with him. And as he was executed at mid-day in the bright glare of the merciless sun in full view of soldiers and jeering, laughing onlookers, she - alone - with his mother and a few other women, stayed with him.

A lot more than Jesus of Nazareth died on that Friday afternoon. What do you make of the blessedness of the meek, of turning the other cheek, of the proposed happiness of giving rather than getting, when the one who said it ends up on a cross? A lot more than Jesus died that afternoon. What do you make of his suggestion that you love one another so the world will know who you are when nothing could be clearer than that the world doesn't give a damn, frankly, about who you are or who he is. What do you make of it when the whole wonderful dream simply disappears as if it never existed and the harsh realities of life impose themselves in the form of a Pontius Pilate, and a screaming mob and a crucifixion.

There is a time to weep and a time to laugh. And this was weeping time. She came alone to the place where he was buried. The sun was not up yet. It was that gray paleness before dawn when seeing is difficult and shapes can be mistaken. She came to weep. As the light increased she noticed that the tomb was open. She looked in. The body was gone. She ran to report it to his friends, John and Peter: John and Peter ran to the tomb and confirmed it. The body was gone. Mary returned to the place of burial and resumed her weeping. A man she assumed was a gardener was there. She asked a logical question. "Where have you taken him?" He said, "Mary." She recognized him as Jesus, now alive. She tried to hold him. He told her not to cling to him, but to go to the others which she did. She said, "I have seen the Lord."

And the laughter began. Her laughter because his truth was true.

His truth had met the harshness and unbelievable cruelty of the world and was victorious. It was not naive foolishness. It was true. And for her it meant that the new person she had become was the real person. The laughter began because something had transpired so utterly unexpected, so utterly astonishing, that the only thing left to do was laugh. The laughter began because death had been defeated.

And we are rendered speechless. Ralph Waldo Emerson said somewhere that when people begin to talk about immortality they automatically start to quote other people. It is because the topic is so huge, so astonishing, so outside the realm of the believable that with no little desperation we look around for some company, for some assurance that we have not altogether taken leave of our senses in actually contemplating the truth of this suggestion. So here is a fresh one from this week's Christian Century. Ursula Niebuhr, widow of the late Reinhold Niebuhr, after his death in 1971, wrote Easter Letters to him full of reminiscence and lots of witty integrity. Ursula, it turns out was a bit of a skeptic. In a charming reflection on Easter morning at Riverside Church in New York "engulfed by throngs of avid church goers, all dressed up for the occasion," she remembers screwing up her courage and expressing her doubts to Harry Emerson Fosdick, the popular preacher at Riverside and a friend of the Niebuhrs'. To her surprise, Fosdick shared with her the problem of trying to preach on Easter, of trying to say something sensible about it. And she remembers fondly what Niebuhr, the distinguished theologian said. "Why don't we let the liturgy take care of what we want to say and cannot say? It's better to sing these hopes, especially if you don't understand what is being sung." [Christian Century, 4/15/87, p. 357]

What the Christian Church has been shouting and laughing about on Easter morning for these 1,900 plus years may not, Niebuhr realized, be able to be understood objectively. The resurrection does not yield easily to scientific analysis. It cannot, that is to say, be proved. The camera man wasn't there and the New Testament is absolutely silent on the subject of what actually happened. Those who come to church on Easter morning hoping this time to hear a water-tight case which will demonstrate beyond any doubt that Jesus rose from his grave and that we can know that in the same way we can know that the grass in green and the daffodils are blooming - will be disappointed. The debate has gone on for twenty centuries and will go on forever. It is not going to be proved. The most sophisticated analysis of the Shroud of Turin will not prove it... I am always amused to be reminded that one of the early church fathers, Tertullian, poked gentle fun at one of the first objective explanations of the empty tomb, namely that the gardener moved the body because he feared the crowds of people would trample his cabbages.

It is helpful to hear from the New Testament accounts that what objective data the friends of Jesus had wasn't persuasive. The empty tomb didn't persuade them at all. Mary looked right at him and didn't recognize him. The reality of this matter, the truth of the Resurrection, is going to make its case at some other level, that is to say. It is when it gets personal: when Jesus calls her name: when the Risen Christ shows up in the context of life, that Mary believes.

That is how it should be. What the Christian Church is shouting and

laughing about on Easter morning is not essentially an event that happened twenty centuries ago. It is about a reality in our world, our time, our lives: a Christ, risen and present and powerfully, redemptively, at work in the world. We laugh and shout because resurrection keeps happening. "Don't cling to me, Mary," he, said which surely means - don't celebrate Easter at all - if it is only the sentimental anniversary of an event that happened long ago. Easter is a time to laugh, because it celebrates a reality which keeps happening in the life of the world. Jesus Christ is alive.

There is, after all, plenty of reason to weep. Part of what the Christian faith announces on Easter weekeend is the reality of evil. William Willimon, preacher to the University at Duke, suggests that there ought to be a sign out front of every church on Easter morning which reads, "No one gets in who wasn't here Friday." And while he doesn't mean that seriously, nor do I, what we do mean is that the Resurrection of Jesus makes sense and has power only in light of the crucifixion of Jesus. What we do mean is that Easter is not about human immortality and the loveliness of the soul and beautiful flowers blooming in the springtime. For those of us who live in the northern hemisphere the confluence of spring flowers and the Resurrection is a happy but essentially irrelevant coincidence. What Easter remembers first is that the world has a way of crucifying its best: that reality is not always cheerful and pleasant: that the life span of idealism in history is astonishingly brief, that tragedy comes to everyone of us. What Easter celebrates is that it is in the middle of evil that resurrection happens: that facing death squarely in the face, Jesus Christ lives. "If it won't preach in a cancer ward or in a shoddy nursing home, it isn't Gospel," someone observed.

There are plenty of reasons to weep. One of them is that to be human is to know about the power of death. Every death is a reminder of our own. The poets know that and say it when we cannot bring ourselves to say it.

Gerard Manly Hopkins -

"Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?...
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for."

There is a delightful Carlyle Marney vignette about the futility of discussing the Resurrection with young people...

"I will not discuss that with people like you," Marney said to a college audience. "I never discuss such matters with anyone under thirty."

"Why?" a student asked.

"Look at you," said Marney, "prime of life, potent, never have known honest-to-God failure, heartburn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what in God's name can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?" [See William Willimon. <u>On A Wild and Windy Mountain,</u> p. 90]

I find that theological quandary posed with great skill in Woody Allen's deceptively simple movies. Throughout them all Allen poses the question with great integrity - "How can we laugh when there are so many reasons for weeping?" And when you do laugh in a Woody Allen movie it is frequently because you recognize the melancholy, the poignant sadness even in the laughing.

It is as old as our humanity. Someone tells us that the power of death is not the final power. There is a "veil spread over all nations" Isaiah, the prophet, observed. "Tell us, please," the entire human family has asked, "that there will be a great feast, that death will be swallowed up and the tears on every face will be wiped away."

Tell us please - show us - as the Psalmist promises that...

"Weeping may tarry for the night
but joy comes in the morning."

Dear God, turn our mourning into dancing.

What the Christian Church has been shouting and sometimes whispering for twenty centuries is that there is reason: that death did not hold God's son: that evil did the best it could and it wasn't enough. What the Christian Church has been saying on Easter morning for more than 1,900 years and what I respectfully proclaim to you on this Easter morning, is that Jesus Christ rose from death. Whoever you are, wherever you are on your pilgrimage, whatever the status of your religious experience - whether you come to church every Sunday because every Sunday is the day of resurrection - or whether you come only on this day - to try one more time to believe what alludes you the rest of the year... whoever you are and wherever you are... what I proclaim to you is that it is time to laugh, and though you will weep again, though evil and tragedy and death will happen in the world and in your life - something else has happened, which is more powerful, more real, namely the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What I proclaim to you is that the power of death in the world has been broken, and that while it may appear that the world still does not care about love and justice, mercy and compassion, and sometimes even crucifies those who seriously advocate and work for their establishment, nevertheless, the power of evil has been broken.

Desmond Tutu bears witness to that truth. In his country - the government is keeping in prison - without trial, hearing or due process, 25,000 of its own citizens, many of them children. There has been an international clamor. And so the government last week said it is illegal to object to that incarceration of these children... to wear t-shirts, bumper stickers, to talk about it and it is an act of treason to encourage protest. Bishop Tutu's response was to call a prayer meeting to do just that... He knows that Christ is risen and that the power of evil is broken.

What I proclaim to you is that the power of death in your life has been broken, and that those you have had to give up to death, have died in the Lord, and are safe in God's eternal love.

What I proclaim to you is that nothing will separate you from God's love: not even your death, and so you are free and you may laugh the laugh of those who know they are free.

What I proclaim to you is that Jesus Christ is alive and present in the world and in your life. And that while you may not ever be able to prove that to the satisfaction of your own intellect let alone anyone else's, I proclaim to you that the risen Christ will call you by name and that in the modest, mundane context of your life, the Resurrection will happen.

The story itself is short on dramatic, incontrovertible resurrection experiences and long on the ordinary, the everyday, the unspectacular. The Risen Christ comes as men walk down a dusty road, or cower in fear, or fish from their boat, or as a woman weeps alone in the hours before dawn.

What I proclaim is that the Risen Christ will be present to you - the power of the Resurrection will be in the ordinariness of your life, when healing happens and redeeming and loving and forgiving and renewing.

"Why are you weeping, Mary..." he asked. And why are you weeping...? Where are you weeping?

The places you are weeping are the places where the risen Christ will appear with power and with new life.

Where are you struggling with the power of death?

Where is your life being hemmed in?

Where is fear, anxiety, worry, diminishing your life...?

Where is illness, emotional distress pressing in on you?

Where in your relationships - are you under the power of death...?

Where have you given in - or given up...?

Those are the places where the Risen Christ will appear to call you by name, and to wipe tears from your face and to give you new life.

What the Christian Church has been saying on Easter morning for more than 1,900 years and what I proclaim to you is that this may be the day of your rebirth: your renewal, your recreation. This is the day of resurrection and though there is -

"a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted.
and though there is a time to weep,
there is, by the power of God's love,
a time to laugh." ... And this is it.

Praise to you great God, for truth
that challenges our imagination.

Praise to you, great God, for truth
so true we can only weep and
sing and laugh at its goodness.

Praise to you, great God, for people
everywhere today singing and
laughing together.

Praise and adoration and glory and honor
to you, great God - for Jesus Christ
who was dead, but is alive, forever.

Amen.